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PRT, with Corps of Engineers' aid, plans solar power for Iraqi school

By John Connor
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TALLIL, Iraq—Paul O’Friel, leader of the Provincial Reconstruction Team for Muthanna Province, is trying to wage peace, with some help from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Recalling how a then-young U.S. Army officer named John J. Pershing waged peace on the southern island of Mindanao in the Philippines over a century ago, O’Friel said, “We’ve done it before and we’ve done it successfully.”

The idea is to deny insurgents the bounce they get from the non-delivery of basic services such as electricity and water; to reduce the sources of public frustration and discontent that are used by insurrectionists to discredit civil leaders and governments.

This can be done in Iraq, O’Friel said, by helping to reinforce pillars of traditional authority such as sheikhs and religious leaders as well as support modern provincial and local level civil institutions. Working with such leaders to select and pursue projects that improve basic services can go a long way toward lancing the boil of discontent so essential to insurgencies, he said.

O’Friel recalled meeting a while ago with a leading sheikh and about 60 sub-sheikhs. He said there was a good deal of skepticism from people who had heard donors promise and fail to deliver in the past, and that he responded by talking about smaller projects with the potential for quick follow-through in order to dem-



Paul O’Friel, a State Department Foreign Service Officer, is working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on design of low cost, high impact projects using solar technologies to bring electrification to new schools and civic facilities in rural Iraq.[USACE Photo]

onstrate credibility and commitment. A leading idea to emerge from this session was reconstructing a school.

Fast forward to the present, when O’Friel and his team are vigorously pursuing a plan to build a new school in an area where electricity is not available and to power it with solar panels. He said a solar panel can be purchased for \$15,000 to \$20,000, requires scant maintenance, doesn’t need fuel, and can have a positive impact on people’s lives.

The school initiative is a pilot project intended to be replicated elsewhere. O’Friel wants to complete it before the end

of this year. The plan is to build a school using \$200,000 in Quick Response Funds (QRF) in a locale without power and to use solar power to transport the school, as he puts it, "from the Middle Ages to the 21st century." The plan also calls for the school to have computers as well as a sister school back in America to help out with school supplies and books.

Other key players on the project are Art Patterson, who serves as the Corps of Engineers' liaison with two PRT teams, including O'Friel's, and Charlie Thomas, a State Department civil servant who is an electrical engineer. The PRTs in Iraq are civil/military undertakings and the PRT program has been described by the Special Inspector General For Iraq Reconstruction as "one of the most valuable programs the U.S. runs in Iraq."

Patterson, who has a power distribution background, said the Corps of Engineers had contacted a company in Dubai that sells solar panels and has sent in requirements and received a proposal. He also has sent out feelers out to other companies. Plans have been drafted and an architect is now on the case, he said. In addition, he said PRT members have found two companies that sell portable, solar-powered computers that are tough and made for use in developing countries. "It's pretty exciting," he said of the project.

Thomas said the key now is to get the proper size solar panel. He said solar power has been around for years but has

become increasingly affordable. "Everything is modular" and very simple to operate and maintain, he said.

"It's a huge plus to go from no power to power," providing children with lights, fans, and "kid computers" that can take rough handling, Thomas said. He said the prototype is a three-room school house, with bathrooms for the children and teachers and a courtyard.

"Doing good is our best weapon," said O'Friel, a State Department Foreign Service Officer and Marine Corps reservist. "We couldn't do it without the Corps of Engineers," he said. "We're partners." He said the Corps has provided assistance in ways such as helping to design the school, assisting in contracting, and identifying solar power suppliers.

O'Friel said school/solar power projects can be done in other tribal areas and that solar technology could be used on other facilities such as community centers associated with mosques. Thomas said they'd also like to equip a clinic with solar power and perhaps a facility that helps care for widows and orphans. Reinforcing such pillars of authority as sheiks and imams can work against militias and help close off Iranian influence, O'Friel said.

Meanwhile, O'Friel, who noted that southern Iraq has an abundance of wind as well as sun, is thinking of ways to put the wind to work for a better Iraq.

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